

JOSE ANTONIO PRIMO DE RIVERA

A spiritual Patriot

By Radbod

"Fascism was born to inspire a faith not of the Right (which at bottom aspires to conserve everything, even injustice) or of the Left (which at bottom aspires to destroy everything, even goodness), but a collective, integral, national faith." - Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera

José Antonio Primo de Rivera y Saenz de Heredia Marques de Estella or 'Jose Antonio' (as he is more commonly called) was born on April 24, 1903 in Madrid to grow up in a healthy aristocratic family environment as the eldest son of General Miguel Primo de Rivera, who was the Leader of Spain from 1923 to 1930. His family was socially prominent in Andalusia, having intermarried with large landholders and merchants around Jerez de la Frontera. From his father José Antonio inherited the title *Marqués de Estella*.

His father, after a rapid and brilliant military career in Cuba, the Philippines, and Morocco, became governor of Cádiz (1915), then in turn captain general of Valencia, Madrid, and Catalonia. From Catalonia he staged a *coup d'état* in September 1923, dissolving the *Cortes* and then establishing, with the full approval of King Alfonso XIII, a military directory. The constitution of 1876 as well as civil liberties were suspended. The military dictatorship was replaced by a civil one (1925); both ruled quite moderately, without the brutalities and extreme repression that characterized later dictatorships. Miguel Primo de Rivera ended the war in Morocco (1926), introduced many measures aimed at economic modernization and administrative reform, and launched an ambitious program of public works, but his rule aroused the opposition of anarcho-syndicalists, Catalan regionalists, and all liberals. His regime was in more than one instance misguided, clumsy, and naive, but it was a basically generous and inclusive one. Spain under him would develop economically, and all Spaniards would share the benefits. There were public works, greater employment, more schools, sanitary improvements, and attention given to worker's rights. An uprising in 1929 by the liberals did not succeed, but various political and economic failures of the regime soon led to his resignation (Jan., 1930). He died in exile in Paris, reportedly of a broken heart.

José Antonio was an intense intellectual and studied the works of philosophers and political thinkers such as Spengler, Keyserling, Marx, Lenin, Ortega, Mussolini, and Trotsky. He went to the University of Madrid to study law and after military service he began a career as a lawyer in 1925. When his father's memory was being made a mockery of in the *Cortes* (parliament), he got involved in politics by holding speeches defending the policies of his father and finally decided to run for parliament. The more they attacked and ridiculed his father, the more antagonistic he became toward their insistence on middle-class liberal democracy and parliamentary forms. His disdain for the political realm would inspire in him a theory for a political system that would retain the positive aspects of his father's regime and create others that would fix the faults. José Antonio also edited the right-wing journal, *El Fascio*. After it was shut down by the Republican government he wrote for the periodical *ABC*.

The Republic was set up in Spain on April 14, 1931 with the end of General Primo de Rivera's dictatorship. The country was therefore not looking for another authoritarian form of government, and definitely not a monarchy since Alfonso XIII had shown that he was utterly incompetent at ruling the Spanish people. The Left finally had the opportunity to govern Spain their way. Yet, disgust with the way things were going was evident just a few months after the Republic was created. In the years that followed emotions became stressed and nerves taut. Promises of change were being broken faster than they were made. The Cortes was plagued with the constant bickering of members concerned only with their propaganda and affairs. Spanish liberalism started to rise and the possibility of creating a political alternative began to be discussed.

World War I had left Europe in a state of disarray. National spirits had risen like heavy perfume on a cold night, sweetening what was left of putrid Europe. Underneath this cloud, however, was still the problem of class struggle and the question of social justice. These two components – national interest and the social question - eventually sparked a new movement, one that called for the nation irrespective of class – nationalistic and socialist. Spain was in a far worse condition than any other country with the possible exception of Portugal, after World War I. The country was in a semi-medieval rut. Around the beginning of the twentieth century about ninety-eight percent of the land was owned by about three percent of the total population. The society was mainly agrarian and organized labor seemed unheard of. Although Spain was improving, thanks to the help of the constitutional monarchy that began in 1875 and the dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera, its growth was unusually slow. And to make matters worse, the regions that did see economic growth were isolated, though more culturally than geographically. Class struggle became increasingly exacerbated. Perhaps the only thing that the middle class, which would be the main component of the Fascist movement, was passionate about at the time was the abatement of the proletarian rebellion, if not avoiding it altogether.

The conditions were finally right for the growth of a national socialist movement. Differing levels of the new movement developed in two other countries beside Spain. Germany would take part in a national socialist movement that suppressed the socialism under the bloated pride of nationalism. Italy apparently had a pragmatic reconciliation of socialist and nationalist aspirations. Spain's national socialist, or Fascist, movement, however, took on a more personal, or individual, patriotic role. The stage was being prepared for the beginning of a Spanish national socialist party, Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera's party.

Jose Antonio offered a fresh look at the system of government. He sympathized with the Republic in feeling disdain for the capitalist system. Like the Left, Jose Antonio believed that Spain had been suffering from the capitalist plague "that turns the worker into a dehumanized cog in the machinery of bourgeois production." However, he also believed that the solution was not the communism that the Left offered. Jose Antonio argued that while a capitalist system "dehumanized" a person, communism "absorbs the individual personality into the State." He spent some time during the early months of 1933 looking for someone to lead a new national socialist movement. He deemed himself unable, claiming that he had "too many intellectual preoccupations to be a leader of the masses" and his possible financiers did not wish to back "another Primo de Rivera." Fortunately, Jose Antonio found "a solid collaborator" in Ruiz de

Alda. Alda was a renowned aviator who himself had been attracted by nationalistic appeals and distrusted the established parties. They got to work together in creating their idealistic brand of national syndicalism. Now all they had to do was wait for a moment when the political atmosphere would be more favorable. The wait was not long for in the fall of that year elections were to be held.

On October 29, 1933 in the *Teatro Comedia* Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera gave a speech where he announced his election into the *Cortes* and the creation of the *Falange Española*. Jose Antonio announced that Sunday evening in the *Teatro Comedia* to a crowd of about 3,000 persons what the Falange stood for: The faith of the Falange was in Spain, that is in the total synthesis of all individuals and classes, which thus synthesized into a new individual and divine destiny. Within this synthesis, there could not be political parties; religion would be tolerated so long as it did not interfere in undefined affairs not of its competence; there could be no drones nor parasites in the new society; all men would have the right but also the duty to work for the community. To achieve the new society, violence might be necessary, but it was not an end in itself. He launched the Falange as a movement committed to overthrowing the government if the political parties of the left should manage to impose their policies on the country. It was part militia, part political party, and part movement, inspired by Mussolini's Fascism, and started preaching about the need for a greater national interest that would be above all the particular or group interests then claiming for attention, and that the answer was not in either the Right or the Left, but in an amalgamation of the best of both.

The party's initials F.E. for *Falange Española* make the Spanish word for "faith", summarizing the feeling of what Jose Antonio held for Spain. He expounded his Revolutionary views in his periodicals *F.E.* (1934) and *Arriba* (1935), and when these publications were suppressed by the state, he addressed meetings across the country and made speeches in the *Cortes* (parliament), to which he had been elected in 1933. In its manifesto the Falange condemned socialism, Marxism, republicanism, and capitalism, and proposed that Spain should become a Fascist state. Professing generally the principles of Fascism, the Falange distinguished itself from other Fascist groups by its great emphasis on national tradition, particularly the imperial and Renaissance Christian traditions of Spain.

The first months of the Falange showed great success. Already they had acquired more members than the National Syndicalists (*Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalist* - J.O.N.S.), the national syndicalist organization, which was headed by Ledesma Ramos. Among the new followers were many university students impressed with Jose Antonio's rhetoric. The J.O.N.S. was similar in style, and quoted roughly one thousand members. There was an immense pressure for the two parties to merge, if they wanted to stay afloat in the political pool. On March 14, 1934 the J.O.N.S. joined the Falange to become one (FE-JONS) under José Antonio as its leader. Jose Antonio agreed to the union; although he disliked Ledesma, the party's leader, and the party's "crudeness."

Yet, violence was nothing new to the Falange party. The violence among Falangists and the Left was intense. Just a few days after the party had formed, its first member was killed. Jose Antonio had asserted that violence would be necessary, and he was absolutely realistic. Many attempts were made at his life, including once when a bomb was thrown at his vehicle. Jose Antonio

reacted by getting out of his car and attempting to shoot the assailants. He did not shudder at the price of freedom of speech. Night after night there were reports of "suspect Fascists" being arrested or gunned down. In the speech on the founding of the Falange Jose Antonio declared, "We are not going to that place [the *Cortes*] to squabble with the *habitués* over the insipid scraps of an unclean feast. Our place is outside...our place is in the open air, under the clear night sky, sword in hand and stars above." A different type of violence was occurring in the party. Many were fearful of the party growing too conservative. While Jose Antonio was strengthening his control, Ledesma abandoned the party at the beginning of 1935. Later that year, Jose Antonio put his party at the service of the Italian government, from which he received a monthly subsidy until June, 1936.

In 1935 the parties of the Left formed the Popular Front, which came to power after the elections of February, 1936, whereas the Falange won only 0.7 per cent of the vote. José Antonio was elected to the *Cortes*. Him being a legally elected official mattered little to the Leftist ruled government in Madrid. To them José Antonio was a symbol of everything they feared - Patriotism, Discipline, Morality and Spirituality. At that time the Falange had neither the numbers nor the money to make a difference. There was no way the Republican government was going to allow the Falangists to gain any kind of power in Spain, in a formally legal way or otherwise.

For a while he managed to keep his followers from responding to the increasing violence in the streets. After the victory of the Popular Front the *Falange Española* grew rapidly and by July had a membership of 40,000. Then he too was swallowed in the gunpoint battles which were the regular form of intercourse at the street level. The situation deteriorated further, and after all other options had failed, Primo de Rivera ended up joining a conspiracy to overthrow the Popular Front government. Primo de Rivera fully supported the military rebellion in July 1936 against the republican government, and after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War the Falange became the dominant political movement of the Nationalists. The Falange militia joined the Insurgents in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39.

When word got back to the Republican government that Falangists were beginning to arm themselves, they set about arresting the leaders of the Falangist movement throughout Spain. The so called Republican government never did a thing to stop the Communists and Socialists from arming themselves or the criminal acts perpetrated by those two groups.

Violence soared through the streets of Madrid. Falangists were being arrested and shot, and vice versa in retaliation. The tensions finally peaked when on the night of July 12, 1936 Jose Calvo Sotelo, the leading spokesman of the organized Right, was supposedly taken into custody. The next morning his body was found at the gates of a cemetery. This was the incident that sparked the fire. Riots broke out, rebellions were implemented, and on July 17, 1936 the Spanish Civil War began. With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, shortly after losing its seats in the *Cortes* at that time, the Spanish Falange was declared an illegal organization by the Republicans. They banned the party, arrested its leaders and closed down its press. Primo de Rivera was arrested on June 5th, 1936 and incarcerated in Alicante Prison by the puppet mercenaries of the State (police), in the power of his opponents. The Falange grew into one of the most powerful movements in Spain while José Antonio was in prison.

Primo de Rivera was tried for his part in the rebellion. He was given a summary trial for conspiring against the Republic and leading a Fascist-based organization and condemned to death. On November 18th, 1936, José Antonio wrote, "Condemned to death yesterday, I pray to God that if He does not still spare me from coming to that last trial, He may preserve in me up to the end the seemly submission with which I contemplate it, and that in judging my soul He may apply to it not the measure of my merits but that of His infinite Mercy."

The circumstances surrounding Jose Antonio's death are very peculiar. The Republican government had grown anxious of the rise in the power of the Fascists. A crackdown was implemented. Fearful of what Jose Antonio might impress upon his followers to do, the Republican government kept him in jail for several months. In his Last Will and Testament Jose Antonio notes that it was not until five to six days before he wrote this statement that he was informed of the charges upon his indictment. On November 20, 1936, Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera was marched out of his cell in Alicante prison and, with a crucifix in his hand and "prayer on his lips," and forgiveness for the enemies about to murder him, was executed by a firing squad. José Antonio died like a Man, he died a Hero, a Martyr and a Saint. His death was not reported until one year later and his remains were unknown.

News of his death was suppressed until a year later. The unknown location of his body inhibited relocation from the Alicante prison cemetery until his brother Miguel, being released from prison, was able to provide information. Before Miguel's statement of the events, the Republican government had tried to cover up the execution by claiming that there had been a mob that broke into the jail and that is was the mob which killed Jose Antonio.

The death of Jose Antonio led to the death of his Falange. The Falange that would precede him would go through vast changes. There was much bickering over who would succeed Jose Antonio. A man, most unworthy of the position, named Hedilla, led the organization for only brief period of time. For Franco was looming in the background, growing more victorious. Eventually the Generalissimo declared himself the *Jefe Nacional* and, on April 19, 1937, changed the organization into the *Falange Espanola Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalist*.

Finally, after three years of lies, Jose Antonio was given his due respect in 1939. His remains were excavated and moved to the Escorial Monastery. Planes dropped wreaths on the Alicante cemetery, and Franco broadcasted a tribute to the dead leader. A huge funeral mass was held that lasted for 10 days and included a 284-mile procession with his coffin on Fascist shoulders. Mussolini had Italian Fascists personally carry a bronze wreath to his grave. Jose Antonio was buried at the Escorial Monastery in the Guadarrama Mountains among Spain's king and queens. After Franco had built the "Valley of the Fallen" his remains were moved there on March 30, 1959, for the last time.

General Franco's party treated José Antonio as a martyr to gain the support of the national revolutionary movement's followers. Merged with the Carlist militia by Francisco Franco in 1937, the organization was renamed *Falange Española Tradicionalista* and was made the official party of the nationalist state. It was a much less independent force than Italian Fascism,

however, and was exploited and manipulated by Franco. From the middle of World War II on, the party grew steadily weaker, and Franco sought to make it a kind of bureaucratic nationalist front. The Falange movement itself was diluted and any vestiges of the old revolutionary spirit were eradicated in order to appease the Roman Catholic Church and the military. By the early 1970s it had virtually no influence. Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera's articles and speeches help to form some of the doctrine of Franco's nationalist movement; but like any and all mainstream political organizations, they could not truly go beyond conventionalism and institute the truly revolutionary aspects of the doctrine that would have made Spain a true Nation of the People.

Hence with everything thus stated it is difficult to imagine that even today people carelessly throw around a word as powerful as 'Fascist.' This term has been loosely used to label anyone person or organization of the Right that is seen as revolutionary, anyone who loves their country above all else, and anyone who approves of an authoritarian government. Today, patriotic middle class Christians that believe in individual responsibility seemed to be labeled Fascists or Fascist sympathizers. Julius Evola had commented that "Fascism has undergone a process which can be called mythologization, and the attitude which many adopt towards it is of a passionate and irrational kind rather than a critical, intellectual one." In a note that was eventually published in the Spanish press on the 10th of December, 1934, Jose Antonio clearly states that the "*Falange Espanola de las J.O.N.S.* is not a Fascist movement. It has certain coincidences with Fascism in essential points which are of universal validity; but it is daily acquiring a clearer outline of its own, and is convinced that by following this path and no other it will find its most fruitful possibilities of development." Even at the end of his life he was intensely frustrated with the political name-calling and bullying. "It astounds me that after three years the immense majority of our countrymen should persist in judging us without having begun to show the least sign of understanding us, and indeed without having even sought or accepted the slightest information."

It is no wonder that in this day and age of immorality and anti-heroes, José Antonio stands out like a Beacon of Light with an ever growing popularity and following throughout, not only Spain but the rest of the world as well.

Rivera's *Obras completas* ("Complete Works") appeared in 1944.





